1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

## THE VILLAGE SETTING

TABLE I

162 **Comparison of age-group distribution of Silwa Bahari and Egypt as a whole.[1]**

| *Age group* | *Percentage of Total Population* | |
|---|---|---|
| | *Silwa* | *Egypt* |
| under 5 | 15·0 | 13·3 |
| 5–9 | 11·9 | 13·9 |
| 10–14 | 11·2 | 12·0 |
| 15–19 | 11·1 | 8·5 |
| 20–29 | 14·5 | 15·2 |
| 30–39 | 13·9 | 14·6 |
| 40–49 | 10·5 | 10·1 |
| 50–59 | 6·1 | 5·9 |
| 60 and over | 5·7 | 6·3 |
| unidentified ages | 0·2 | 0·2 |

361 Like many other villages in Upper Egypt, Silwa lies at the foot of the Eastern Plateau. This physical setting divides the villagers' world in Silwa into three distinct parts: the 'hills', the villages, and the fields. The barren [823] 'hills', with their rugged dark rocks, though a source of fear and apprehen- [241] sion to the children, are not so inhospitable for the adults who rely on the [134] salty clay (nitrous soil) found in these hills for use as land fertilizer. The [342] village itself is composed of compact houses built of sandstone, which is available in the environment. There is hardly any planning in the village scheme, except for three main streets cutting across the village from east 363 to west and another main street leading from north to south; the first three forming the main routes from the village to the fields. The rest of the by-ways between the houses are narrow and twisted and are occasionally interrupted by heaps of stones and rubble. After 1936, owing to the increase 362 of village population, a new space between the old village and the railway line was allotted free by the government for building purposes. Most of this space has been built upon and inhabited mainly by those married sons whose parental homes have not sufficient room for their accommodation. 361 However, the finest buildings in the village are the two mosques. With [346] whitewashed walls, elegant and dignified minarets, and a floor covered with mats, these mosques represent one of the most cohesive forces in the [182] life of the villagers – religion.

[1] Here the percentages in Silwa are worked out from the figures given for 1947, but those of Egypt from the figures of 1937. Thus one could assume that the percentages of age groups have not radically changed. On the other hand, there are no details about age groups in Silwa in the 1937 Census.

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt

# THE FELLĀḤĪN OF UPPER EGYPT

## CHAPTER I

### EGYPTIAN VILLAGES AND THEIR INHABITANTS

THE natural barriers of Egypt (Fig. 1) have enabled the inhabitants, particularly those of the upper country, to live in comparative isolation throughout the whole of their history. On the north side lies the sea, along the east and west sides stretch vast, almost waterless deserts, while to the south ingress by way of the Nile is impeded by a series of cataracts. Their geographical isolation has doubtless been responsible for the characteristic conservatism of the Egyptian peasants. This conservatism is particularly apparent in their religious and social customs and their commoner industries, which, as will be more especially seen in the final chapter, have remained almost, if not entirely, unchanged from Pharaonic times.

The vast solitudes of the deserts are terrifying to the country folk, most of whom, up to the present day, cannot be induced to traverse even the lower fringes of those wastes after sunset (see Fig. 2). Fear of hyenas, and, still more, fear of *ʿafārīt*,[1] forbids any man to venture beyond the cultivation at night. The ordinary peasant, unless he is obliged to remain in the fields either to protect his crops or to watch over his sheep and goats, returns to his village before sunset, remaining there until just before the dawn of the following day.

The deserts have proved themselves valuable defences against invasion, the peoples who conquered the country at different periods of its history having usually entered it from the north-east. These invaders do not seem to have left any very marked impression on the physical aspect of the Upper Egyptians at any rate; most of these still bear a striking facial resemblance to the ancient inhabitants of the land whom we see depicted on the walls of the temples and tomb-chapels and in the portrait-statues of the Old,

[1] See Chapter XIV.

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt

# THE FELLĀḤĪN OF UPPER EGYPT

Shops of different kinds are situated in the wider streets or lanes, with open fronts which can be closed with wooden shutters when the owners are away (Fig. 11). Through the open shop-fronts the tailors are to be seen making *ǧalālīb* (long blouses; singular, *gallabīyeh*) for their customers, and in some villages one may watch the coppersmiths manufacturing bowls and jars. The vessels are hammered into shape over iron bars fixed in the ground. The iron bar is bent over at a right angle at the top, and flattened out so as to form a kind of anvil, on which the bowl or other vessel is beaten into shape.

FIG. 11. A VILLAGE STREET WITH SHOPS AND BUTCHERS' BOOTHS

Benches of bricks and mud (*maṣāṭib*, singular *maṣṭabeh*) are found outside some of the houses, and on them is usually to be seen a collection of children, fowls, goats, and even sheep, in happy promiscuity. Or perhaps a *maṣṭabeh* may be occupied solely by an old man, spinning wool, or holding a rosary in his hand and slowly passing the beads between his fingers and thumb (Fig. 12).

During harvest-time the swishing of the sticks as men and women beat the grain from the bundles of corn which they have received as wages for work in the fields,[1] resounds along the village streets.

The Yūsuf Canal (Figs. 4 and 13) flows past a village in which I have frequently resided, and there is a good deal of folklore connected with it. The water is believed to possess curative properties

[1] See Chapter X.

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt



for sore eyes, fever, and other complaints. The canal, according to the peasants, was made in a miraculous way by the patriarch Joseph (Yūsuf). They relate that he started one day to walk from Deirūṭ, where the Baḥr el-Yūsuf (Canal of Joseph) diverges from the Ibrahimīyeh Canal, and as he went he trailed his stick behind him. Water began to flow along the course marked by his stick until he came to the lake Ḳarūn, at the north-west side of Fayūm Province, and into this lake the numerous streams in which the Baḥr terminates disgorge themselves. Owing to this belief regarding the origin of the canal, its water is believed to contain much *barakeh* (blessing, healing virtues, good luck), and accordingly, on the day of *Shemm en-Nesīm*, which coincides with the Coptic Easter Monday, the men make a point of bathing in the canal, for on this occasion the water is believed to be endowed with *barakeh* to a special degree.

FIG. 12. A MAN WITH A ROSARY SITTING ON A MAṢṬABEH

The following is another tradition connected with the Baḥr el-Yūsuf.[1] It is a translation from an Arabic manuscript. " Joseph, to whom may Allah show mercy and grant peace, when he was Prime Minister of Egypt and high in favour with Raiyan, his

[1] Quoted by Sir R. H. Brown, K.C.M.G., R.E., in *The Fayûm and Lake Moeris* (London, 1892), pp. 22–24.

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt



pit. Shortly after this she appeared first to her brother, then to her mother, and then again to her brother, to whom she related the circumstances of her death and the exact spot where they would find the filled-in well at the bottom of which her body lay. The brother reported this to the proper officials, who went to the spot, had the well excavated, and found the woman's body at the bottom, just as she had told her mother and brother. The husband and the friend who had assisted him in the murder were convicted on this evidence, and sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment.

One day a week—in some parts of Egypt on Thursday, in others on Friday—the villagers pay a visit to the graves of their relations and friends. The ceremony is called *eṭ-Ṭala'*, meaning the coming forth or the going up. Many of the cemeteries are situated in the lower desert, and this name may have been given because the people always speak of 'going up' to and 'descending' from the desert. On the day of *eṭ-Ṭala'* the souls of the dead are believed to return to their graves, and they expect their relatives to meet them there. I have often taken part in these ceremonies, and the following description of one of my visits shows what the proceedings are on such occasions.

The cemetery where the events described took place is situated in the lower desert, and it runs parallel to an ancient burial site lying rather nearer the upper-desert slope. It is a sand- and wind-swept place, and the palm-branches stuck into the mounds above the graves quickly wither and assume the pale tawny colour of the surrounding desert. But from the high-desert slope above, where I was camping with my brother, the shadows cast by these branches are so dark that they give the impression of black-clad figures kneeling in perpetual grief, keeping silent watch by each grave. From the camp I could see the people on their way to visit the graves, and also much that was going on in the cemetery itself. Early in the morning processions of women, often accompanied by their male relatives, were to be seen wending their way from the neighbouring villages toward this desert graveyard. Some were walking, some, mostly men, were riding on donkeys. As soon as the sound of the still distant wailing reached our camp I would mount my donkey and start off to meet the mourners in the cemetery. A number of *fuḳahā* were always present on these occasions, as it was their business to recite various passages from the Ḳorān by the gravesides, for which purpose they are hired by the visitors.

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt
Coots MR10



boy fell to the ground, where a stone struck one of his eyes and destroyed the sight. The boy then knew that the donkey was really an *ʿafrīt* which had assumed animal form, and presently he heard it saying, " Don't come here again. If you do I will injure you ! "

Up to the present time the boy, who is now a grown man, has never dared to return to this church for fear of the *ʿafrīt*. He told my informant this story himself, and swears to the truth of it.

The *ʿafārīt*, as I have already explained, sometimes leave their subterranean home and come above ground. It is therefore considered dangerous to stamp on the ground, to strike it with a stick, or to throw anything violently on it. Such acts should be especially avoided at night, when the *ʿafārīt* are believed to come up in large numbers. If a man, therefore, has to walk some distance at night he is glad if he can get a fisherman to accompany him, for he believes that then no *ʿafrīt* will come near him. The *ʿafārīt* are afraid of fishermen and of their nets, and when they see these men throwing their nets they run away in terror. One woman told me that the *ʿafārīt* fear that they may get caught in the nets.

A few days after I had left a certain village in Upper Egypt a boy who was employed by the *ʿomdeh* (headman of the village) was in the building containing the machinery installed by the *ʿomdeh* for pumping up water for irrigating his fields. It was at night, and for some reason or other the boy happened to stamp on the ground with his feet. Soon after he lay down to sleep, but was aroused by an *ʿafrīt* who tried to pluck out his eyes. The boy cried out, " Oh, leave me, and forgive me ! " But the *ʿafrīt* refused, saying that when he had stamped on the ground he had injured the head of one of his children. The boy cried out, and then, being a Copt, crossed himself, whereupon the *ʿafrīt* disappeared.

That *ʿafārīt* are capable of kindly actions is shown in the following belief. A boy who is still uncircumcised may be mysteriously carried away when sleeping beside his mother at night. He will be brought back to his sleeping-place on the same night, and on the following morning his mother will find that he has been circumcised, the operation having been much better done than if it had been performed by the village barber; moreover, the wound will be found to have already healed. In such a case it is believed that the boy has a good *ḳarīn* who has brought good *ʿafārīt* to perform this painful operation painlessly.

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt
Copts MR10



thus thrown away. I have not as yet come across this custom myself.

On this day most of the people rise very early and go into the fields, spending the entire day out of doors. The men, at any rate in Fayūm Province, usually bathe in the Yūsuf Canal, the water of which is supposed to possess special *barakeh* on this occasion.[1]

On *Yōm Sabt en-Nūr*—the Sabbath, or Saturday, of the Light—people of both sexes and of all ages put into their eyes a small

FIG. 149. PALM-BRANCHES PLAITED INTO VARIOUS SHAPES, USED IN A COPTIC CHURCH ON PALM SUNDAY

quantity of powder made from the placenta of a cat dried and pounded.[2] It is believed to make the eyes beautiful. To be told that you have the eyes of a cat is a great compliment (see p. 220).

On the Coptic Palm Sunday it is the custom to plait the leaves of palm-branches, without their being removed from the mid-rib, into a variety of forms, many of which are very intricate. Sometimes a round loaf of Eucharistic bread is enclosed within the plaited leaves. These palm-branches are taken to the church for the service held on this occasion. The illustration (Fig. 149) shows a group of men holding their palms, which they had taken to the church belonging to a Coptic monastery in the desert close

[1] See p. 33.

[2] *Cf.* E. W. Lane, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 223.

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt
Ancient Egypt MR5



entertained all the household of Pharaoh." This account suggests that in ancient as in modern times the bride's furniture was conveyed with some ceremony from her parents' house to that of her husband (p. 93); we also see that the ancient like the modern bridegroom used to entertain his male friends on the night of his marriage (p. 93).

It is stated on p. 95 that a sum of money is sometimes paid by the party who applies for a divorce to the other party. That, as can be seen from the ancient marriage-contract translated above, and from those published by Professor Griffith,[1] was the prevailing custom in late Pharaonic and Ptolemaic Egypt. Ancient bills of divorcement are still extant, the earliest dating from the time of Darius, and some of them have been published and translated by Professor Griffith.[2]

It is interesting to observe, in connexion with the modern practice (p. 107) of a mother's attaching a small piece of fox-skin to the head of her last-born living child to ensure her bearing again, that the sign 𓃥 (*ms*), used in writing the verb *msy* (give birth) and its derivatives, consists in well-formed examples of three fox-skins tied together.[3] This suggests that there may have been some association of foxes with fertility in ancient Egypt.

The water used for washing a dead Muslim is brought either from a mosque or from some sacred well or pool connected with a sheikh (p. 109). Similarly, in ancient times the formulæ pronounced while the washing of the corpse took place state that the water has issued from Elephantine, and so is the exudation of Osiris, or that it has been drawn from some sacred pool connected with the sun-cult, or that it is the efflux of the sun-god or the womb of the sky-goddess out of which the god emerged.[4]

That the washer of the corpse may be a *fiḳīh* (p. 109) shows that this performance still possesses some, though probably quite vague, religious significance.

The utterly uncontrolled grief displayed by the women when

[1] See p. 291, footnote 6.

[2] *Catalogue of the Demotic Papyri in the John Rylands Library*, vol. iii, p. 117.

[3] See A. M. Blackman, *Man*, vol. ix, pp. 9 f.; L. Borchardt, *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache*, vol. xliv, pp. 75 f.; A. Erman, *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache*, vol. xlv, p. 92.

[4] See A. M. Blackman, *Recueil de travaux relatifs à la philologie et l'archéologie égyptiennes*, vol. xxxix, pp. 44 ff.; *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archæology*, vol. xl, pp. 57–66, 86–91; *Journal of Egyptian Archæology*, vol. v, pp. 117 ff., 157 ff.

## Chapter VIII

## TRADITIONS OF THE SOIL

181 Certain traditions, rites and ceremonies are handed down from generation to generation without being either questioned or understood(**). These are traditions of the soil, bearing witness to the union of the fellah with his field, and the closeness of the peasant group to soil and water and their products.

This intimacy was clear enough when we were considering the work, life and home of the fellah. We shall do well to prepare ourselves for a study of the fellah's psychology (Chapter IX) by considering some of the traditional rites and customs which are to be met with at every turn of his life.

These are not merely superstitions, though it would be as difficult for us as it is for the fellaheen themselves to explain the origin or meaning of them all. One thing they all seem to have in common: they point to a mysterious correlation between nature and man. Unconsciously or subconsciously, in repeating these rites the fellah shows an instinctive feeling that he belongs to the soil. It is a feeling which has contributed a good deal to the stagnation of the Egyptian countryside.

312 271 823 The fellaheen have a great respect for water, the water that comes from the Nile. They avoid filtering it, so as not to take the life out of it. They bring it to be blessed by the passing missionary, and offer it as a familiar and much-appreciated drink. They never mistrust it, and make no distinction between washing- and drinking-water. All water is good, like the Nile from which it comes.

796 823 The festival of the Bride of the Nile, or the Cutting of the Dam, takes place in Cairo (**) at the height of the flood. The fellah has no part in it, but he feels much more than any townsman that the Nile is male and alive. The river is always flowing within his sight, either in the foreground,

or like a silver thread in the distance. He resorts to it more often than to his fellowmen. He does not pray to it, as his ancestors did, but he constantly visits it. The Nile is in his blood. There is the same intimate bond between the Nile and the fellaheen as between the sea and the fishermen of Brittany. They even call it *el Bahr*, the sea, and their fields they call "shores" (*el rîf* — plural *el ariaf* — the usual word for the Egyptian countryside) (ʿʿa). At High Nile they believe women to be more fertile and men more healthy; marriages are most often celebrated at this season. If a child is sickly or ill, his mother takes him on the Nile at this time, and makes him throw sweets and dates into the clayey waters, with the words "Oh Nile, let my strength grow like your depth". A dying fellah, before he breathes his last, is given a final draught of its living water.

In the Coptic Mass there is the following prayer: "Vouchsafe, O Lord, to bless this year the water of the river. By Thy grace bring it to due height. Gladden the face of the land, that the fields may have water and the crops be multiplied."

The silt of the Nile has its part also in the rites of life and death. The fellâha, when her time is coming, crawls to the brink of the water and takes up a handful of moist earth, which she will swallow at the time of delivery to ensure a successful birth.

When the *mizayen* cuts the child's hair for the first time, the hair ceremoniously cut off is not flung to the winds, but carefully rolled into a ball of earth.

Professional mourners bedaub their breasts, heads, and arms with mud as a sign of grief. The body is put into the earth without either coffin or clothes.

The fellaheen bury in the earth the jar containing their savings, and charms which they wish to take effect. Every birth affects the soil; the after-brith is buried inside the house, and the umbilical cord, wrapped up in a little bag with a few grains of corn, is dug into the father's field.

The fruits of the earth are still more closely involved in this peasant mysticism. The analogies between vegetable life and the peasants' own extremely physical existence make them believe in an interplay of fertility between the two.

The ceremonies of the seventh day, when the newly-born child is washed and given a name, often include the following

183 The women are more intelligent than the men. Sir
184 William Willcocks, whose great achievements in irrigation by no means prevented him from studying the fellaheen, explains the difference thus: — "A bad government, if passively accepted by men, who are naturally active, will sooner or later demoralise them. The same government, if passively submitted to by women, who are naturally passive, tends on the contrary to develop their intelligence. That is why the fellah women are not only more intelligent, but more trustworthy than the men (*)".

This opinion is open to discussion. The fact it seeks to explain — the traditional feminism of Egypt — is quite clear.

181 The fellah's wife is also more cunning than her husband,
183 which is saying a good deal. Like all weak people the fellah
562 practises cunning to the point of duplicity. He knows how to conceal his joy, his suffering or his crime. His inexpressive features are a great help. In his shifts and dodges — when he leaves it to time to decide, when he agrees without any intention of keeping his word, when he uses evasive language or purposely misunderstands — he shows an adaptability which is indeed a kind of intelligence, but intelligence at the level of instinct.

181 The fellah seems lacking in logic. In reality his ideas run parallel, and he judges by his own standards. Ask a
[823] fellah how far it is to a certain village, and he will reply "A piastre bus-ride".

181 The *'omda* understands this mentality perfectly. "Go
565 to your father, my lad, and tell him that the Bey (his creditor) is waiting here for him. If your father isn't there, tell him to come all the same, for the Bey knows that he is there." And the father, his bluff called in advance, comes along without any trouble at all.

181 The truth is that the fellah does not think outside the immediate present; he is fettered to the actual moment. No time and place except the present have much effect on his mind, because they have none on his senses. He is like a primitive man or a child; his intellect is controlled by his senses, and remains close to things felt and done. The fellah looks for causes and effects in the field not of reason, sight. Life to him is a succession but of todays. That is why he seems illogical.

8:Schaefer A-5 (1900-1901) 1904
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt

10.

## The Well Zemzem.

The well Zemzem is the miraculous well in the Mosque of Mekka. Pilgrims drink from it and are accustomed to carry vials of its water home with them. In a very similar song of Dalman's (P. 8; from Ḥawāra in Aglûn in Palestine) the Zemzem well is addressed, but it means a girl. Perhaps our song is also to be thus understood.

*Ya bīrî Zemzem, salabik selāsil,*
*weš-šurbê minnik dawa lim-mesāfir.*
*Ya bīrî Zemzem salabik ḥarīr,*
*weš-šurbê minnik dawa lil-ʿalīl.*

Thou Zemzem well, thy ropes are like chains,
And to drink from thee is medicine for the traveler.
Thou Zemzem well, thy ropes are like silk,
And to drink from thee is medecine for the sick.

1. 3. This is a draught-well. Its ropes are as strong as chains and as soft as silk.

9: Klunzinger D-5 (1863-1875) 1878
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt



796 [521 526] in conversation, ball playing, and gymnastic exercises, and those whose conscience allows it smell the contents of their dram-bottle as well as the fresh air and roast meat. Health must be inhaled to-day since the five days' period of terror, the time of the *chamasin*, is now at hand. A serpent then wanders over the earth and infects the atmosphere with its poisonous breath, leaving behind small-pox, plague, cholera ("the yellow wind"), and all other varieties of disease. The curse is not removed till Whitsuntide dissolves it.

753 796 [796]

### THE NIGHT OF THE DROP.

796 873 On the 17th of June a "drop" falls (according to the ancients a tear of Isis) into the decreasing waters of the Nile, and impregnates the wonderful stream. Its effect is soon after observed in the dirtier colour of the water, then in its more rapid flow, and lastly in its increase and overflow. On this day, or on the night, the "night of the drop," young and old flock to the banks of the blessed stream.

### THE NEBUS DAY.

541 On the 10th September, the first day of the Coptic solar year, the river has reached to about its highest point, and on this day—the *nerûs*, the people give themselves up to the pleasures of the carnival. For three days it is all up with the rule of the Turks; every little town chooses for itself in its own way, and from its own midst, a ruler (*abu nerus*), who has a towering fool's cap set upon his head, and a long spectral beard of flax fastened to his chin, and is clothed in a peculiar garment. With a long sceptre in his hand, and followed by a crowd of correspondingly-dressed bailiffs, hangmen, and scribes, he promenades the streets and turns his steps straight to the hall of the chief magistrate. Every one bends before him, the guards at the door make way, the governor of the province or of the town has the humour to let himself be ousted, while the new dignitary seats himself on his throne and holds a most rigorous criminal investiga-